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DONGOLA PROVINCE OF THE ANGLO-EGYPTIAN SUDAN

By LOUIS C. WEST

Dongola Province, the most northern but one of the administrative divisions of the Anglo-Egyptian Sudan, lies between the parallels of 16° 0' and 19° 40' N. west of an irregular line in about 32° 30' E. (Fig. 1). Essentially, however, it comprises the Nile Valley from the Third Cataract to the Fourth Cataract, both of which, except for a few months each year when the Nile reaches the highest point of its annual rise, effectively bar river navigation. There are at present two practicable ways by which the traveler may enter the province. The first and easiest is by the branch railroad which extends to Kareima at the foot of the Fourth Cataract from Abu Hamed, which has rail connections with Egypt, Khartum, and the Red Sea ports of Port Sudan and Suakin. The other available route is by camel or horse from Wadi Halfa at the foot of the Second Cataract through the Batn el Hagar to Kerma at the head of the Third Cataract. This is the historic trade route into the Sudan which we know was in use as early as the Sixth Egyptian Dynasty, some 4,500 years ago.

On the rocks which face the river at Tombos, six or seven miles from Kerma, are the well-known inscriptions carved by the generals of Thothmes I to record the fact that his armies had reached the fertile plain of Dongola and that his empire stretched from this point to the Euphrates. During the war with the Mahdi and his successor the Khalifa, the English built a railroad for military purposes from Wadi Halfa to Kerma; but service over this was discontinued some seven or eight years ago, and the rails were in large part removed. The reason given was that the sharp gradients on the line made its operation unprofitable; the real reason seems to have been an effort to force the province to use the railroad at the southern end of the district and in this way to come into closer economic touch with the rest of the Sudan. So far this effort has been a failure: the profitable export business with Egypt which might have been easily developed has been crippled and no corresponding gain made in the amount of trade with Khartum. That such efforts forcibly to divert the direction of a country's trade are unscientific is shown by the long lines of camels which daily cross the dismantled railroad line near Kerma on their way to and from Wadi Halfa.

SOIL AND AGRICULTURE

With a more industrious population Dongola would be a land of amazing prosperity. Its soil is said to be the most fertile in the Sudan, but as a result of universal disease, of successive low Nile floods, and of a generally indolent population there is only a narrow strip of cultivation along the river. From Kareima to Ambigol the land on both sides of the river is

cultivated; from Ambigol to Dongola one or the other bank is cultivated, but rarely both. In favorable years the district between Kareima and Ambigol may be compared with the Fayum rather than with any other part of Egypt south of Cairo. In the winter of 1913-14, however, the province was suffering from the effects of an unusually low Nile. In many places the river was flowing between banks that were absolutely barren except for the

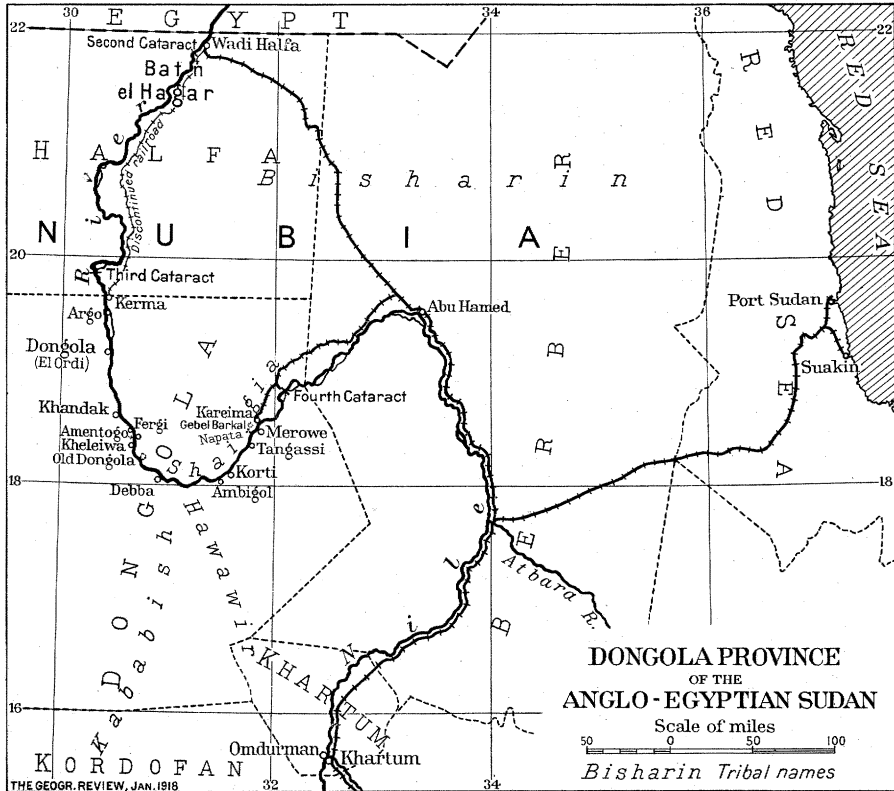


FIG. 1—Sketch map of Dongola Province and other parts of the northern Anglo-Egyptian Sudan. Scale, 1:7,400,000.

thorn bush; at other places the strip of cultivation varied in width from a few yards to a mile, seldom if ever within the limits of the province exceeding the latter width.

The main crops are durra, wheat, *simsim*, barley, and dates. In a favorable year three crops of cereals may be grown, two for example of the fast-ripening durra and one of the slower wheat or barley. The dates are both plentiful and excellent, forming the chief article of export. Some senna grows wild and is sent to Assuan or Kordofan. The people do not realize the possibilities of their land and probably never will until they are replaced by skilled industrious workmen such as the *fellahin* of Egypt.

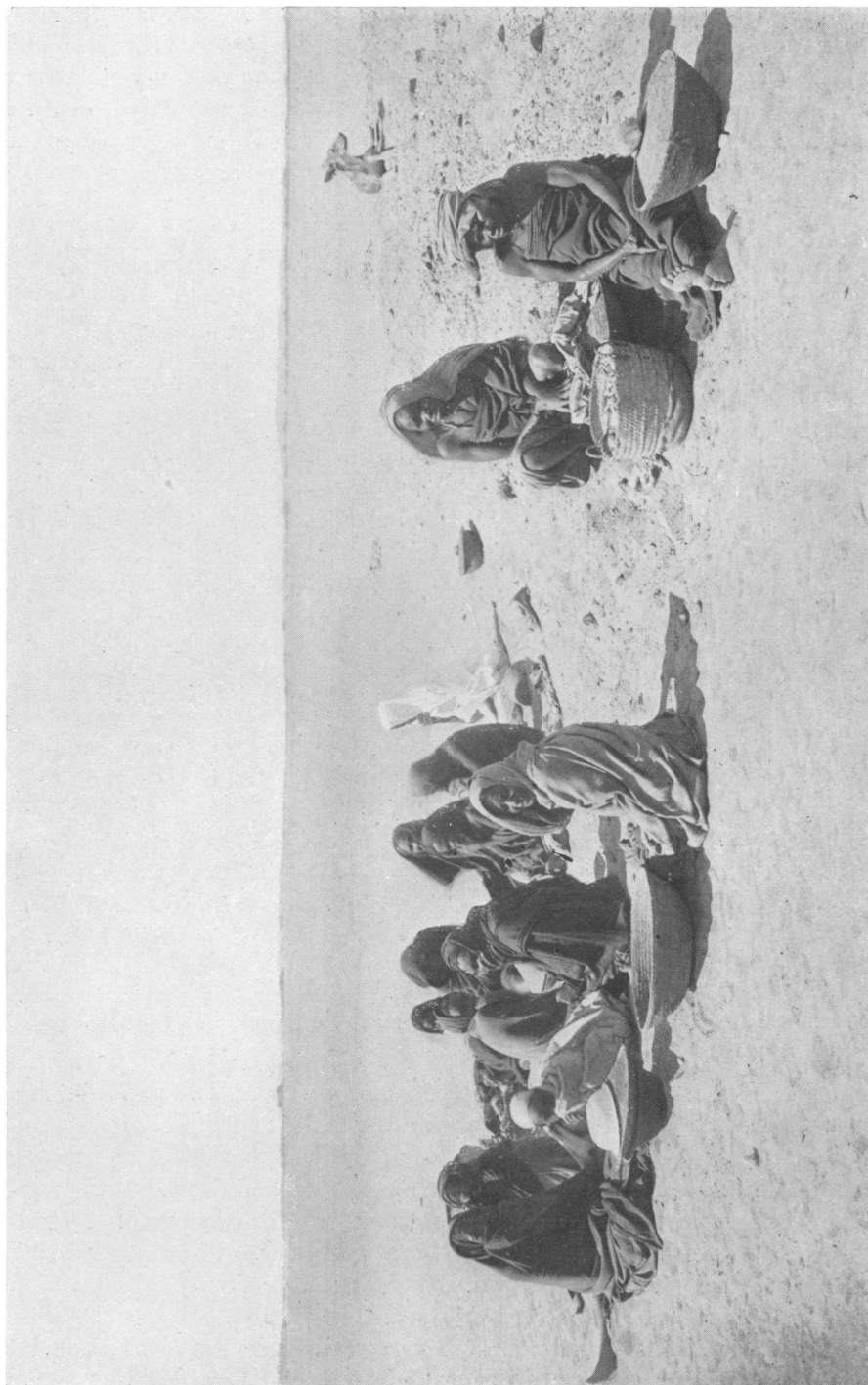


FIG. 2—Group of Dongolawi women.

Several varieties of native vegetables are grown, and occasionally one will find a patch of watermelon. Potatoes are altogether lacking, as are fruits. There is but one orange grove in the district and that is in the garden of the English governor at Merowe. So far little effort has been made to grow cotton, a crop the government is making every effort to advance in the country nearer Khartum.

ANIMAL LIFE

Of wild animals the province has the addax, a rare species of antelope; a handsome gray fox with large ears and tail; and the ever fascinating gazelle. The pariah dog of the province, an animal half wild and half tame, is a small greyhound, altogether unlike the mongrel seen in Egypt. In certain parts of the river crocodile abound, while on the desert one occasionally sees the warena, the so-called land crocodile, but in reality a large lizard. Chameleons are often seen, particularly on the walls of houses when they are stalking flies. Unlike the familiar reptile sold by our street fakers, these chameleons are sometimes three or four inches in height. They look extremely formidable but in reality are harmless, their only weapons of offense or defense being their power to change color and their long sticky tongue.

Camels are extremely numerous and of a good quality. Their hair is a recognized article of commerce and is woven into various articles for household use, but not, I believe, into articles for personal wear. Camel-hair runners, 20 inches wide and 9 or 10 feet in length, are sold by the weavers, who furnish all their material, for about 50 cents, or the equivalent of three days' pay of an ordinary laborer.

Some twenty years ago the breeding of the small active Dongolawi horse was a flourishing industry, but at present this seems totally abandoned; horses in fact are seldom used by the native population. Donkeys are everywhere; the majority as despondent-looking and as ill-treated as they are elsewhere in the East, while a few are of great size and strength. There are also countless goats, some cattle, and a few oxen. The cattle are largely used to drive the *sakiyehs* (water wheels) and are only rarely killed for food. What the goats find to live on is one of the great mysteries of the Sudan. Every morning they are driven out on the desert to be brought back only at sunset. Always emaciated and hungry-looking, they still manage to exist, feeding mainly on the tiny leaves of the desert thorn bush, and to yield their owners a thin ill-tasting milk. Every family has its flock of fowls, each one a little tougher and a little less palatable than the others. Eggs could be bought in the winter of 1913-14 for about five cents a dozen, while live sheep sold for 60 cents to \$1.50 apiece.

Of less agreeable "animals," the scorpion, nimetta, and white ant hold first place. The nimetta, a very small fly, infests the region from Delgo to Korti during the winter season, November to April. These pests fly in

dense clouds, and the countless bites which they inflict bring on an extreme irritation often resulting in a slight fever. The nimetta is disliked, not because of any danger from fever that may arise from his bites, but simply because of the discomfort he causes. He finds his way into one's hair, ears, nostrils, mouth, and at times becomes absolutely unbearable, neither the face veils worn by the Europeans nor the smudges carried by the natives being of any effect. The only thing to do is to keep moving. Fortunately the nimetta is active only in the daytime and then only when the wind is comparatively quiet. The white ant is not common. Rarely one will see a beam of wood eaten through and through until hardly more than the shell of paint remains; but, as thorough painting prevents its ravages, this insect is not greatly to be feared.

SCENERY AND MIRAGES

For agricultural purposes, the almost negligible rainfall is of no value. The farms are irrigated almost without exception by water taken from the river by means of the *sakiyeh*, or water wheel (Fig. 3). Traveling along the river one passes a constant succession of *sakiyeh* pits with their grass screens, their crude creaking wooden wheels, their dripping earthen pots fastened to the revolving rope, their blindfolded bullocks or cows urged on by little boys or girls. The *shaduf*, or water sweep, so common in Egypt, is apparently not used in the province; none at least was seen there during a five months' residence.

There is little of interest in the landscape with the exception of the daily mirages and the wonderful color effects of the sunset. Beyond the narrow strip of cultivation, vivid in its green, and with its tall waving palm trees, there is only the desert with its yellow sand, its thorns and acacias, and its dazzling sunlight. At places hills and peaks rising abruptly out of the desert give variety and a certain charm to the view. The mirages are at first of great interest. Standing on the desert in the middle of the day one appears to be in the center of an island, so perfect is the resemblance of the mirage to water; yet as one advances the "devil's river," as the natives call it, constantly recedes in the distance.

There are two kinds of mirages, the so-called sky mirage and the so-called ground mirage. Both are caused in the same way: by the superposition of two layers of air of such difference in specific gravity or density that their plane of contact forms a reflecting surface. When this reflecting surface is below the level of one's eye, as it practically always is, we have a ground mirage. Here one sees nothing but the reflection of the sky, which, by making the reflecting surface appear blue, gives it a perfect resemblance to water. This resemblance is increased by the effect of the wind, which causes waves, and by trees or other objects which may project through the reflecting surface of the mirage and cast their shadows upon it. Occasionally one will see a string of camels, or a line of walking men with their legs

completely hidden below the reflecting surface and looking for all the world as if they were wading through a shallow lake.

When the reflecting surface happens to be above the level of one's eye, we have a sky mirage. In this is seen nothing but the reflection of objects actually on the earth, these objects of course appearing upside down. The

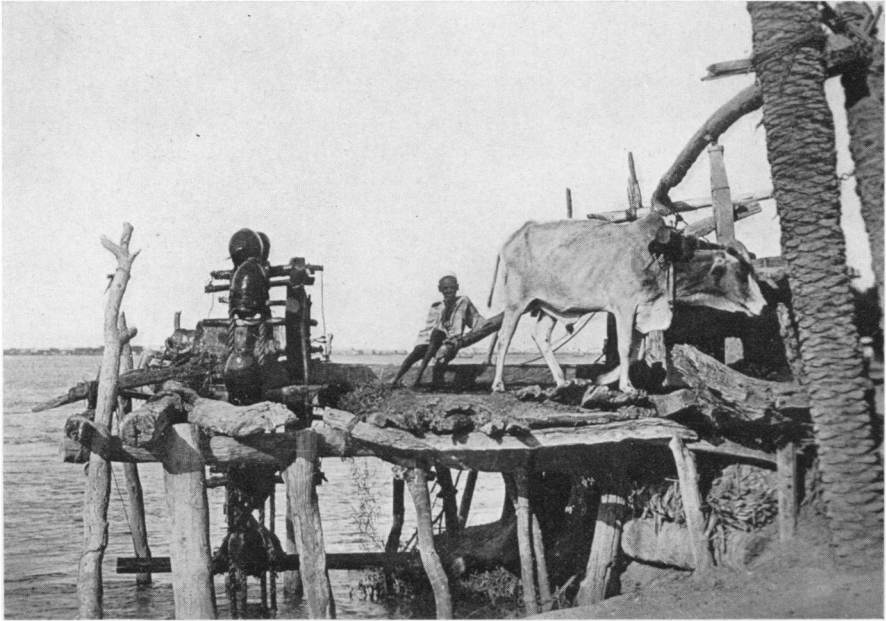


FIG. 3—A Dongolawi *sakiyeh*, or water wheel. (Photo copyright by G. N. Morhig, Khartum.)

effect on a small scale may be obtained by holding a mirror above one's head and watching the reflection of objects on the floor. No man ever saw in a sky mirage the reflection of an oasis with the palms standing right side up. Such a thing is optically impossible; just as much so as would be the reflection of some object not actually in existence on the earth.

THE INHABITANTS

The main interest of the country is not in the scenery but in the people. The agricultural population on the river banks forms physically as well as geographically the link between the true negro to the south and the Egyptian to the north. Ethnologically these people may be classed as Nubas or Barabra. They are smaller and darker than the Egyptian, but still not black, even though many of them have the short kinky hair of the negro.

Less negroid in appearance are the two nomadic types one meets in the province: the nomads who live along the river banks and those who live out in the desert. The former are known as Gararish while the desert tribes are Bisharin, Hawawir, Kababish, and Shaigia. Though Arabic is generally

spoken by these people it is not their native tongue. From Wadi Halfa to Kerma the people speak a Nuba dialect known as Mahasi; from Kerma to about Kareima, a dialect known as Dongolawi.

Owing to the extensive slave trade formerly carried on in the district



FIG. 4—Entrance to a courtyard of a native house near Kerma. The plates over the door are supposed to bring good luck.

and to the great number of slaves still there, the population contains many pure negroes and half-blooded negroes. In addition there are a few Turks, a few Greeks, a few Egyptians, and possibly a few true Arabs. Every free man in the province claims to be a full-blooded Arab himself, but this claim has no basis in fact. The Arabs, it is true, dominate the northern Sudan and do this without having exterminated the former inhabitants or even having entirely supplanted the native dialects. Contrary to their usual custom they intermarried freely with the natives in former times and have so impressed their religious ideas and political theories upon the people that many of the

native customs have entirely disappeared and others, like the local dialects, are being gradually stamped out.

DRESS

Having crossed the desert that separates Abu Hamed from Wadi Halfa, the traveler notices at once differences in the native customs as compared with those of Egypt. For one thing, the face veil is generally absent and the women seldom cover their faces at the approach of men. Then there is the general use of white clothing by the men in place of the black almost universally worn by the peasants in Egypt. South of Khartum dress is still largely a matter of ornament, but in Dongola, despite the great heat, the people dress in about the same way as in Egypt. The peasant woman, like the man, wears a pair of drawers resembling the lower half of a suit of pajamas but fitting tightly just below the knee. Over this a sheet of cotton is fastened around the waist so as to form a kind of skirt. Usually there is another sheet fastened around the shoulders so as to form a blouse, but this is often omitted. The Egyptian woman, if she is of the peasant class,

always has her upper garment so arranged that she can pull it across her face on the approach of a strange man. The upper part of her body and the back of her head are always covered; and, if she happens to be a woman of position, her arms and hands are never left bare. Such niceties of dress and etiquette are altogether unknown, or at least are not practiced, by the Dongolawi woman.

The essential part of a young girl's dress is a short skirt made of many leather thongs, 10 or 12 inches long, tied to a cord which is fastened around the waist. Over this a skirt may or may not be worn, as the fancy of the wearer dictates. Boys of the same age wear simply a loin cloth. Very little girls and boys run naked, their only ornament being a bracelet or a charm hung around the neck, by means of which disease and particularly the evil eye may be averted.

Unmarried girls wear the hair braided into hundreds of tiny plaits, exactly in the fashion which ancient cemeteries show was followed 4,000 years ago (Fig. 5). The women, both married and unmarried, use hair oil in abundance, so much of it in fact that often in the hot sun one will see it dripping onto their shoulders. All are equally fond of jewelry: necklaces of gold, amber, or glass beads; earrings, nose rings, finger rings, bracelets, and anklets of gold, silver, brass, or ivory. Shells or bright glass beads are often tied to the hair, while on the forehead a large flat ring may be worn. Without exception, the men wear small leather charms tied to the arm or round the neck. These, to be efficacious, contain small pieces of paper covered with magical verses. The people believe that though one such charm is a protection still no harm can come from wearing more, and often a man will have from ten to fifteen fastened to his body.

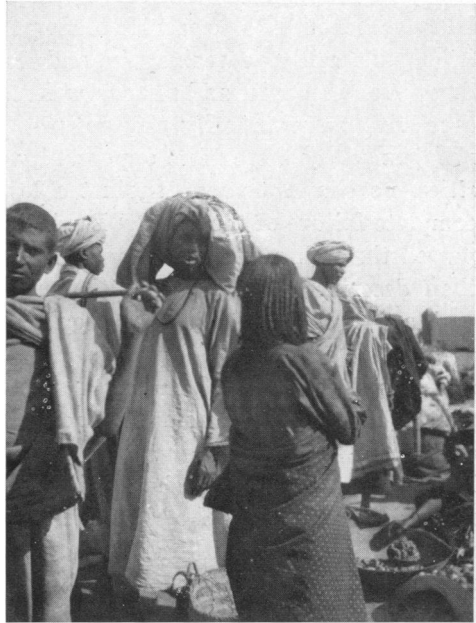


FIG. 5—In the market at Kerma. Hair plaits such as those worn by the girl were in use 4,000 years ago.

THE LIFE OF THE PEOPLE

Despite the general disinclination to work, the people make, if sufficiently urged, efficient laborers. Their skill and ingenuity in mechanical lines is amply shown by their handsome, highly colored baskets, their well-known *damur* cloth, and their tasteful jewelry. Men have been known to walk

200 miles for a chance to earn 15 cents a day, but this is only under the urgings of great need. One man, when asked why he had given up a place where he was making 17½ cents a day, as much if not more than he had ever earned before, replied that he could not live on that money and so was doing nothing. Almost without exception a man will work only until he has saved enough to permit his loafing for a few days; then, when his money is gone, he will seek work again, and the process is repeated. On 15 cents a day a man can raise and support a family, and the great bulk of the people are living on practically this amount. It is just enough to support life; needless to say there is no opportunity to buy anything but the bare necessities, no chance to save against a low Nile and the resultant partial or complete failure of the crops. During the year 1913-14 the northern Sudan passed through a period of famine. The suffering can be better imagined than described. Not only cattle but human beings died of hunger. In such a time the bad traits of a people all come to the surface. Many of the able-bodied men went elsewhere, leaving their wives and children to get along as they could. Some of these men, but apparently only a few, sent part of their earnings home; the rest seemingly forgot they had any family obligations. The few who had grain kept it. Unlike the fortunate in Egypt, they refused to share with those who were hungry. Many even refused to sell, despite the high prices they were offered, believing they could make still more by holding their grain until it could be sold as seed at the next high Nile. The government did what it could. Emergency relief work was started on which a man or woman could make 7½ to 10 cents a day; grain was imported and sold at cost or even given away. But despite utmost efforts, the women and children, who enlisted special sympathy, proved hardest to provide for and consequently suffered most. Even when crops are good the poorer people are barely able to get along; one young boy was heard to say that he had never had enough to eat, and that everyone was always a "little hungry."

The Sudan is one of the few countries where slavery is still legally recognized. The slave trade, it is true, was abolished after the downfall of the Khalifa and certain regulations enacted by which the condition of the slave was bettered. But as long as the rule remains that every child of a slave mother is a slave, there can be no great decrease in their numbers. Apart from the fact that his freedom of action is necessarily limited, the slave calls for no pity. Outwardly there is nothing by which he can be distinguished from his owner, and the general standard of living is so low that even in this respect he is little worse off than the free man. As a general thing a slave is kept busy on his owner's field, but often he is allowed to go away, or he is sent away, to seek more profitable work. Under such circumstances he is allowed to keep a part of his earnings, sometimes half, sometimes more.

As in Egypt, girls are married at an extremely early age. In the selec-

tion of their husbands their inclinations or desires have little if any weight. Matchmaking is altogether the business of the parents or guardians, and it is the boy whose family is prepared to pay most that has first choice. As among the peasants in Egypt, a cow, a buffalo, or its equivalent is usually the price paid to the girl's father. When we remember that a woman is a worker and an active producer it does not seem illogical that the father should be recompensed for the economic loss he suffers when a female member of his family departs. Although every family desires its first child to be a boy, perhaps the majority want a girl as the second. As one father said, a boy costs money, but a girl brings it in. The greater the number of children in a family, the more pleased are both the father and the mother. One man who was said to have eighteen sons was the envy of the surrounding country, but families of this size are rare.

EDUCATION

A vast majority of the population in Dongola Province can neither read nor write. Even if there were any interest in affairs outside of the village, the cost of the cheapest newspaper would be beyond all but the favored few. There are a few boys' schools in the province, but so far their benefits are limited to the families who live in the immediate neighborhood and who at the same time are able to bear the financial loss arising from the boys' absence from work. These schools are under the government ministry of education, are visited at least once a year by government inspectors (Englishmen), and on the whole are doing splendid work. The character of the teaching may be inferred from the fact that the "higher mathematics" given in Gordon College, the head of the educational system, is about equivalent to the mathematics given in one of our better high schools. There is, however, a constantly increasing desire on the part of the people for an education. A striking example of this may be seen in the case of an Egyptian army officer who was stationed as *mamur*, or mayor, of the district of Argo. He was resigning his position and his chance of a pension so as to be able to take his daughter to Cairo for her education. Some time previously he had obtained special permission for her to attend the local boys' school but was dissatisfied with that. He himself was a good example of the better-class Egyptian. His army record was good, his administrative efficiency as *mamur* was beyond serious criticism. He spoke Arabic, French, and English. In conversation one day he brought up the subject of America. To explain some statement he was trying to make he drew a map of the Mediterranean, of England, and America. The United States appeared as a small island, with New York on the western side. That American farmers had no occasion to irrigate, as the country had enough rain for all agricultural purposes, seemed especially remarkable to him, as indeed it did to every native. A word picture of the Woolworth Building he absolutely refused to believe.



FIG. 6.



FIG. 7.

FIG. 6—A small store in the desert.

FIG. 7—A typical Dongolawi house.



FIG. 8.

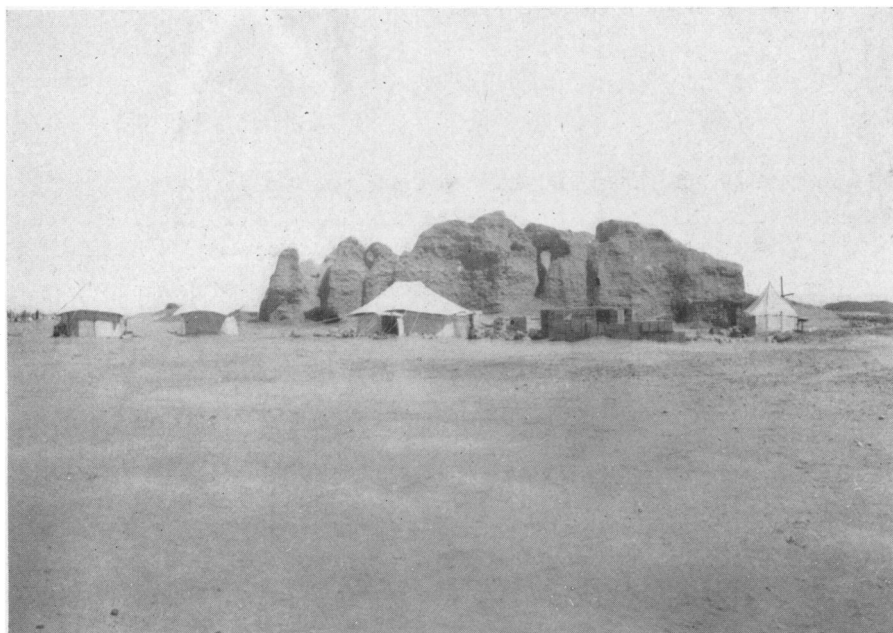


FIG. 9.

FIG. 8—A sheikh's tomb near Kerma, built of mud brick.

FIG. 9—A ruined mud brick temple dating from 2000 B. C.

A TRIP DOWN THE RIVER

Three days are necessary for the trip down stream from Kareima to Kerma, a distance of about 200 miles. For the return trip, up stream, the little steamer takes five days, making on the average 40 miles a day and tying up for the night. The word hurry and the necessity for it are both unknown in the province.

Leaving Kareima the first sight of interest is Gebel Barkal. At the foot of this "Sacred Mount" is the cemetery of the ancient city of Napata, which



FIG. 10—Date palms growing through the drifting sand.

lay directly opposite on the west bank of the river. Napata was the home of the Ethiopian kings who in the eighth century B. C. conquered Egypt and held it for about two generations, when they were finally driven out by the Assyrians. In imitation of the Old Kingdom in Egypt, the people of Napata erected little pyramids over the bodies of their dead kings. Eight or nine of these are still standing in a good state of preservation. They vary in height from 40 to 60 feet, being far smaller than their enormous prototypes at Gizeh, the two largest of which tower 450 feet in the air.

About four miles beyond Gebel Barkal is the town of Merowe, the residence of the English governor of the province. The town is new, with wide streets lined with shade trees and with handsome red and white houses, built for the use of various government officials. Just beyond Merowe is Tangassi, whose market is known throughout the Sudan, being exceeded in size only by that of Omdurman. At Debba, some distance farther down

stream, the river makes a gigantic bend to the north. From beyond Kareima it had been flowing toward the southwest but it now definitely turns toward the Mediterranean, flowing northward from here with hardly a bend of any great size. In the famine of the winter of 1913-14 Debba was the center of the stricken district of the province. As the steamer pulled up to the bank, crowds of women and children came running down to the landing place to meet it. The picture they presented was one that no one wishes to see twice. As we walked ashore every hand was stretched out for gifts, but not a person, old or young, made any audible plea for money. No words could have made so powerful an appeal as the mere presence of those shrunk, shrivelled forms. At the sight of money a perfect riot broke out. One man, thoughtlessly giving away small coins, was in an instant the center of a howling mob from which it took three policemen to rescue him.

Formerly Debba was a town of considerable importance. Here the ivory and gum traders bringing their wares from Kordofan and Darfur exchanged them for European goods. At present its chief importance arises from the fact that it is the farthest point regularly reached by the sailing boats from the northern end of the province. As is the case in Egypt, Dongola Province has an almost constant north wind. This carries laden sail boats as far as Debba easily and quickly, but owing to the great bend in the river here, one finds if he tries to proceed farther that the north wind which so far has been a following wind is now a head wind. Articles could be sent from Dongola to the railroad by the government steamer, but to save money the native merchants usually send their freight by native sail boat to Debba, where it is transhipped to the steamer for the rest of the trip.

OLD AND NEW DONGOLA

A short distance from Debba is Old Dongola, now altogether deserted, but once the capital of a Christian empire which flourished here during the sixth century. The floor of the old church is still to be found under the mosque built by the Arab conquerors to replace it. Close by are the remains of a large fort, around which lie the tumbled ruins of the mud brick houses of the old inhabitants.

Christian remains are found at many places in the province, at Khandak, Fergi, Khelelwa, and Amentogo. Directly above the landing place at Khandak is a large imposing mud brick fort. To judge from the potsherds which lie under foot, this structure was first built in early Christian times and then rebuilt and re-used at a much later date. Khandak itself is a town of no great interest, its chief importance in the eyes of the traveler being its manufacture of the highly colored baskets which are offered for sale here.

Dongola, or El Ordi, as it is known to the natives, is situated about 40 miles beyond Khandak. It is the largest village in the province, containing sixty or seventy permanent shops, four or five mills for grinding grain, a



FIG. 11.



FIG. 12.

FIG. 11—Typical view of an Upper Nile cataract. (Photo copyright by G. N. Morhig, Khartum.)

FIG. 12—A boy using a reed canoe in the rapids at Tombos.

small hospital, a doctor, and three English officials—half of the entire white population of the province. The last telegraph station in the province is located at Argo, about 30 miles north of Dongola, while Kerma, some 8 miles farther, is the last station reached by the government steamer. Owing to the dangerous channel the boat can only reach Kerma during three or four months a year; for the rest of the time it stops at Dongola or Argo, as the state of the water or the whim of the engineer dictates.

ANTIQUITIES

Near Argo is a ruined temple, next to the Napata remains the best known antiquity in the province. The plan of the building can hardly be made out, no trace of the walls appearing above the mounds of rubbish and debris which now cover the site. At either side, however, of what was once the main entrance lie two colossal statues of some unknown king; while in the courtyard is standing the famous headless statue of Sebekhotep, a king of the Thirteenth Egyptian Dynasty, who reigned about 2,000 years before Christ. At Kerma are the interesting cemeteries described in the *Bulletin of the Boston Museum of Fine Arts* for April, 1914, while just beyond, at Tombos, on the rocks which overlook the cataracts there, are the stelae erected by Thothmes I.

This list of antiquities, while interesting to a few, is not such as will tempt the traveler any farther from the railroad than Gebel Barkal. But for those interested in getting away from the crowds of tourists who infest Egypt, no more interesting trip could be planned than one by horse or camel from Wadi Halfa to Kerma through the wild beauties of the Batn el Hagar and thence by steamer to the railroad at Kareima. The country is absolutely new as far as tourists are concerned, in the winter of 1913-14 but two persons other than government officials and a Cairo-Khartum aviator visiting the northern end of the province.